

country, for this, by my father, is hard. There is no escape from death; it comes sooner or later; may God prolong your life, spare you for your friends, and keep sorrow away from you.

## F. CONCLUSION

By my father, my master, I am disquieted because of you and because of the absence of letters from you. May God let me hear good tidings about you soon. Perhaps you could send me a letter to Ascalon, in care of my lord Abū Isaac Abraham, the Son of the Scholar,<sup>16</sup> which would make my heart somewhat lighter and, together with it, perhaps a letter from M. Abū 'Alī [Ḥassū]n b. Yaḥyā<sup>17</sup> containing news and a report about goods arriving from the West; and perhaps a courier carrying a letter for me has arrived from there. (Two lines, written in the margin and concluding the letter, are lost. The top of the letter contains a note on an old woman, apparently a relative of Nahray, referred to also in other letters to Nahray from Jerusalem.)

(Address:)

To my master and lord Abū Yaḥyā, may God support and help him in his mercy.

Nahray, son of Nissīm, (*may he*) *r(est in) E(den)*, God is his protector and helper.

From his grateful Solomon b. Moses, son of Isaac, (*may he*) *r(est in) E(den)*, of Sfax. *Much support (to you from God)*.

(In Arabic characters: Approximately the same text, but Solomon is called here Ḥassūn, either a misunderstanding of the clerk, or the Arabic name was temporarily changed. "To Fustat" is erroneously written twice. The sender is called "the Maghrebi from Sfax.")

<sup>16</sup> About this personality and his sojourn in Ascalon see *Med. Soc.*, I, 238-239. On his way back Solomon would stay and do some business in that seaport of southern Palestine.

<sup>17</sup> See n. 9, above.

## 33 FROM THE CORRESPONDENCE OF SCHOLARS

*From al-Mahdiyya, Tunisia, to Fustat*

1061

The writer of this letter was the Jewish chief judge of al-Mahdiyya. The judge, like a Muslim qadi, or the Christian patriarch of Alexandria, also engaged in business, and examples of the commercial correspondence between him and Nahray have been preserved. But this letter deals mainly, though not exclusively, with learned and legal matters. The scholar referred to in secs. A-D with such epithets as "Light of the World" or "Renewer of the Religion" was R. Nissīm b. Jacob, one of the greatest rabbinical authorities of all times (see no. 75, n. 10, below, where a book of his is copied in Messina, Sicily, ninety-two years later).

Our letter was written after 1057, the date of the ruin of Qayrawān, when R. Nissīm and other inhabitants of that city had found refuge in Sūsa, a seaport on the Tunisian coast north of al-Mahdiyya. R. Nissīm died in 1062 (see next selection). The reference to the Sicilian city whose male inhabitants were put to sword by the conquering Normans (sec. H) fits the fall of Messina in 1061.<sup>1</sup>

Institute Narodov Azii, Leningrad, D-55, no. 13.<sup>2</sup>

## A. NAHRAY'S EYE DISEASE

In Your name.

I am writing to you, . . . from al-Mahdiyya, at the end of Av (August), . . . The situation is well in hand,<sup>3</sup> thank God who dispenses all benefactions.

Your letters, my lord, . . . worried, disquieted, and troubled me, and scared the sleep from my eyes, because of the eye disease which had attacked you. I ask God to take care of you and to heal you and to never let me hear anything sorrowful about you and to accept me as a ransom for you. *May he send his word and heal you, heal you completely. Amen. May thus be his will.*

<sup>1</sup> Amari, *Musulmani di Sicilia*, III, 71.

<sup>2</sup> Ed. S. D. Goitein, *Tarbiz* 36 (1966), 56-72.

<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the ruin of Qayrawān and the devastation of the Tunisian countryside.

I sent your letter to the [. . .], the Light of the World, and he wrote me how much he regretted to learn about your illness. He prayed for you, and I am confident his prayer will be accepted. I remained disquieted, however, until our friends arrived telling me that you were well and that your eyesight had been restored. But I shall not be completely quiet until I shall receive a letter from you to this effect. May God always let me have happy news from you.

B. THE COPYING OF R. NISSĪM'S WORKS,  
INTERRUPTED BY HIS ILLNESS

I wish to inform you, my lord, . . . that I asked a friend in Sūsa to buy parchment and to deliver it to a copyist. Unfortunately, they have only one copyist there, who also teaches children so that he can devote only a part of his time to copying.<sup>4</sup> He has already done sixteen quires, which have been compared with the original. The continuation had to be postponed because of what happened to our master, the great Rāv.<sup>5</sup> He was almost given up, and the community was grieved and disturbed, for he is *our solace in our misery, and under his shadow we live among the nations*.<sup>6</sup> But God looked upon us and did not afflict us and blind our eyes. He remained weak for some time. But recently I received his illustrious letter in which he breaks the good news of his complete recuperation. We praised God that he looked upon us and did not disgrace us, for the life of the master means progress for the nation, upholding of the Law, and renewal of the religion. I ask God to grant him life for us and for all the *communities* and accept us as a ransom from all evil destined for him.

C. A LEARNED LETTER OF NAHRAY LOST

The master had taken notice of your criticism of a legal opinion by *our master* Hay<sup>7</sup> of (*blessed*) *m(emory)*. But he noted: "I know

<sup>4</sup> A common combination. See *Med. Soc.*, II, 189, 237.

<sup>5</sup> This shows that R. Nissim supervised the copying of his works in person. Since much of his work has been found in the Cairo Geniza, this remark is not without importance.

<sup>6</sup> Referring in Lamentations 4:20 to "the anointed of the Lord," the king.

<sup>7</sup> The *responsums*, or answers to legal queries, by Hay Gaon (d. 1038) were eagerly studied long after his death.

that this legal opinion is open to objection, but I shall wait until Nahray's letter with the difficulties pointed out by him will arrive; then I shall explain the matter to him, for I have a fine solution for them." God, the exalted, however, ordained what happened to the letter on its way to Sūsa, which distressed our master very much.<sup>8</sup>

On the very day the copied quires arrived from Sūsa, I gave them to merchants from Damascus. But they said: "We have no proper place for carrying them." I shall send them to you in one of the boats.

The beginning of the commentary of our master on [. . .] was copied here, in al-Mahdiyya, on my order and I was about to have it bound and dispatched, when a beautiful and carefully corrected copy turned up.<sup>9</sup> I had the copying stopped.

D. A CASE OF INHERITANCE

I read what you have written concerning the affair of M. Israel<sup>10</sup> and have appointed an attorney in Sūsa, who informed me that he could not get more than 10 dinars out of Israel's brother, even after *our master* had talked to him. He wrote me himself, assuring me under heavy oath that Israel owed him over 100 dinars,<sup>11</sup> and asked me to let the matter rest until he would have written to his brother. After consultation with *our master* I issued him a certificate on the payment of these 10 dinars.

<sup>8</sup> The Writer had informed R. Nissim of the point made by Nahray in a general way, to which the master had responded as reported here. But Nahray's letter was lost on the way between al-Mahdiyya and Sūsa, presumably in a case of robbery, about which the writer had reported in a previous communication.

<sup>9</sup> Probably looted during the sack of Qayrawān. My translation here corrects the version provided in *Tarbiz* 36 (1966), 61 and 69.

<sup>10</sup> A cousin and frequent correspondent of Nahray, whose brother, also called Abū Yahyā Nahray, sojourned in Sūsa.

<sup>11</sup> Very unlikely that the man would have paid even a penny if he was able to substantiate a claim on 100 dinars. Such exaggerated assertions were common at the beginning of a lawsuit.

## E. PLEA FOR THE WRITER'S BROTHER

As to my words of excuse for my elder son and younger brother<sup>12</sup>—God knows that he is dearer to me than my own soul. In fact, no blame comes to him at all. Only because of my exaggerated love for him have I used some strong words against him. I ask God to protect my lord, . . . and now I am quiet that my brother has found a friend in such an illustrious man as my lord and I have no doubt that now he will be successful and well-guided.

## F. A CONSIGNMENT SENT WITH THE QADI'S "BOY"

You noted what you had sent with the agent of the qadi, (may) G(od) in (spire him with right decisions).<sup>13</sup> He said, however, to Abū Lamtūna:<sup>14</sup> "The thing got lost in *Qawn*; the councilmen<sup>15</sup> attacked us." I had written to my brother (the recipient) to send with him only a fixed, replaceable sum,<sup>16</sup> but not [. . .]. Now I had to prove the exact nature of the consignment. But they said: "Your brother likes us, why should he not confide his wares to us and we would carry them to you to your full satisfaction?"<sup>17</sup> When he comes to your place again, you will sue him, for he is [joining?] Abraham, the messenger, who travels to your parts this year, God willing.

## G. REVIVAL OF JEWISH LEARNING IN EGYPT

I was much pleased to read in your letter about the dedication to the study of the Torah and the zeal for learning shown by the son of *our master* Nathan of (blessed) me(mory), the head of the

<sup>12</sup> The writer calls his younger brother Abū Zikrī Judah b. Moses, a prominent merchant from Qayrawān active in Egypt (see no. 28, above), "elder son," because he educated him. The words of affection are remarkable. In a previous letter, Labrāt had purposely used some harsh words while writing about his beloved brother.

<sup>13</sup> Interesting that a Jewish judge uses this blessing for a Muslim colleague in a letter addressed to another Jewish divine.

<sup>14</sup> Certainly the local Muslim representative of the merchants. A Berber.

<sup>15</sup> Ar. *shūrāwīn*. In the times of anarchy, towns made themselves independent under "councils," *shūrā*, which, as a sideline, practiced banditry. See Dozy, *Supplément*, 1, 799.

<sup>16</sup> Read: *mithl maḥdūd*.

<sup>17</sup> The qadi's employee seems to emphasize that *force majeure*, not negligence on his side, was involved.

yeshiva.<sup>18</sup> May God keep his youthful zest<sup>19</sup> and support him. And may he protect the life of our lord, the *Rāu*,<sup>20</sup> may his honored position be permanent and may he always receive God's favors. For through him God has revived learning (in Egypt), illuminated the community and fortified religion. He must continue his efforts, knowing how much he has already achieved in those parts and how great his reward will be for this. May God keep him and multiply men like him in Israel. No doubt God pays special attention to this community, for he does not leave a generation without a man who revives what has become defective and teaches what might be in danger of being forgotten, for thus he has promised us: "*It will never cease from the mouth of their offspring.*"<sup>21</sup>

## H. THE NORMAN CONQUEST OF SICILY

You inquired, my lord, . . . about Sicily. The situation deteriorates constantly, and everyone is terribly disturbed about the progress of the enemy who has already conquered most of the island. The prices here go up, for this place must rely for its supply of grain entirely on Sicily.<sup>22</sup> Twelve families of our coreligionists have been taken captive,<sup>23</sup> and countless numbers of Muslims. May God protect all those of Israel who have remained there. [Messina (?) was conquered] by sword and a number of Jews died there. All these are matters which require attention.<sup>24</sup> May God look upon us in his mercy and hide us in the treasure houses of his forgiveness.

<sup>18</sup> Nathan I b. Abraham served as head of the Jewish high council of Jerusalem for a short time only (1039-1042), but was president of its court for many years. His grandson and namesake served again in this capacity, while his great-grandson, compelled to leave war-ridden Palestine, was appointed judge in (New) Cairo. I cannot say which of the sons of Nathan I is intended here.

<sup>19</sup> Ar. *tamm allāh shabābhu*, a phrase never seen by me.

<sup>20</sup> About this personality in Fustat, who is referred to in countless letters solely with this designation "the Master," see no. 35, below.

<sup>21</sup> Deuteronomy 31:21.

<sup>22</sup> This astonishing statement had its immediate reason in the devastation of the countryside by the Arab bedouins, but the dependence of the Tunisian seaports on Sicily for their supply of grain remained a reality for centuries. See H. R. Idris, *JESHO* 4 (1961), 235.

<sup>23</sup> The exact number of captives was known to the judge probably because he had to deal with their ransoming.

<sup>24</sup> The care for the survivors. After all the terrors that had afflicted Tunisia

Please, never let me be without an illustrious letter of yours reporting your good health and any concern you may have so that I can deal with it to your satisfaction, . . . Kindest regards to my lord. Your servant Mūsā<sup>25</sup> sends to my lord kindest regards.

God is sufficient for me and in him I trust.

(Address:)

(To) my master and lord, the illustrious elder Abū Yaḥyā M. R. Nahray, son of R. Nissīm, (*may he*) *r(est in) E(den)*, may God prolong his life and always protect him and keep him prosperous.

(From) Labraṭ, son of Moses, (*may his*) *s(oul) r(est in peace)*, Ibn Sighmār.<sup>26</sup>

(Nahray's address is repeated in Ar. characters. As destination "his home," obviously known to the courier, is given.)

### 34 DEATH OF THE MASTER

August 12, 1062

The writer of this letter, Yeshū'ā b. Isma'īl (see selections 13-16, above), and Nahray b. Nissīm had studied in their youth with R. Nissīm b. Jacob of Qayrawān.<sup>1</sup> Here Yeshū'ā informs Nahray of the death of their spiritual mentor a day after he had learned about it from travelers arriving from Sicily.

The date of the letter is established by the reference to the death of the Sicilian condottiere Ibn al-Thumna, who was killed in March 1062 (see Amari, *Musulmani di Sicilia*, III, 89).

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter Collection,  
TS 13 J 19, f. 20, *Nahray* 88.

recently, the judge looked at the Norman conquest of Sicily more from a practical point of view.

<sup>25</sup> Moses, the son of the judge. He might have been the copyist, who wrote this letter calligraphically.

<sup>26</sup> The non-Hebrew names are Berber, not Arabic.

<sup>1</sup> See no. 33, introduction, above.

### A. SAD TIMES<sup>2</sup>

I am writing to you . . . from Alexandria on the 4th of Elul (August 12, 1062) . . . My body is sound, but my soul is sore. But we must be grateful to God under all circumstances. "*He spoke, and so it was.*"<sup>3</sup> Your letter—may God make you honored—arrived after I had not seen a letter from you, nor heard from you, for a long time. Then your letter came, delivered by the courier Surūr ("Happiness"),<sup>4</sup> and from it I learned about your well-being; may God make it permanent. I thanked him, the exalted, for his benefaction. The worries expressed by you are shared by me. May God, the exalted, *hide us in the shadow of his wings*<sup>5</sup> and not summon us to his court in this time of great tribulations.

### B. DEATH OF THE MASTER

The gravest of all, however, that afflicted my heart is what I have to communicate you now:

The boat of Mujāhid ("Warrior in the Holy War")<sup>6</sup> arrived from Mazara (Sicily) after a passage of seventeen days. A number of our Spanish coreligionists traveled in it, among them Abū Jacob Joseph, whose son-in-law is in Miṣr (Cairo-Fustat). The boat arrived on Friday, the day of the new moon, but they were able to disembark only yesterday, on Sunday. I went to them and asked them about news from Sicily. They reported good and reassuring news, namely, that Ibn al-Thumna had been killed and that the situation in the place had become settled.

Today I was visited by M. Isaac, son of R. 'Ābid ("Devout," "Pietist")<sup>7</sup> and he relayed to me calamitous news from them "*which*

<sup>2</sup> The year 1062 marked the complete collapse of civil government in Egypt and its replacement by the anarchy of rivaling bands of mercenaries. In that year a pitched battle was fought between the Turkish and the black battalions of the caliph just outside Cairo, in which the former remained victorious.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 33:9, which, however, refers to the miracle of creation.

<sup>4</sup> An equivalent of Heb. Simhā. A Jewish courier. See no. 31, n. 1, above.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Psalm 17:8.

<sup>6</sup> Mentioned as already being on its way from Egypt to Tunisia in 1046 and as sailing from Denia, Spain, to Alexandria, with no Jewish passenger on board in TS 8 J 20, f. 2, a letter by Isma'īl b. Farah. See no. 31, above.

<sup>7</sup> His name was Nissīm al-'Ābid b. Isaac (TS 12.150, dated Fustat, 1005). Isaac and his sons Abraham and Moses were active as merchants. There were other families bearing this name in both the eleventh and twelfth centuries.